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HOW TO ORGANIZE SUCCESSFULLY AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

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HOW TO ORGANIZE SUCCESSFULLY AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

International conferences and symposia are becoming an accepted mode of transferring technology and CANMET has sponsored successfully a number of such events in recent years. This report outlines various steps that are necessary to sponsor and organize an international conference which is successful both technically and financially.

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COMMENT ORGANISER AVEC SUCCÈS UNE CONFÉRENCE INTERNATIONALE

par

V.M. MALHOTRA*

RÉSUMÉ

Les conférences internationales et les symposiums deviennent de plus en plus un mode accepté de transfert de technologie et CANMET a déjà patronné avec succès ces dernières années plusieurs de ces évènements. Le présent rapport met en lumière les différentes étapes qui sont nécessaires pour patronner et organiser des conférences internationales qui seront des succès, tant au niveau financier que technique.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years a number of organizations have sponsored national and international conferences to bring together representatives from industry, universities and government agencies to present the latest information on selected topics, and to discuss the areas of needed research of mutual interest in these subjects. CANMET is no exception, and during the last 10 years it has sponsored a series of international conferences dealing with concrete technology and other subjects. Each of these conferences has been an unqualified success. This report draws upon the experience gained during the organization of some of these conferences, and outlines various organizational steps needed to conduct a successful international conference.

IS THERE A NEED FOR AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE?

There are principally two reasons why an international conference should be sponsored.

First, an international conference is justified if a research program has reached a stage when there is a need to disseminate information to an international audience, thus paving the way for technology transfer.

Secondly, an international conference is justified when a new research project is initiated and it is necessary to find out on a first-hand basis the current state of technology world-wide, and to make personal contact with those engaged in research. This can be very productive and can eliminate effectively false starts and misguided directions.

It is, of course, assumed that researchers in the organization that is sponsoring an international conference, have national and international standing. This is a must because it gives scientific credibility to the event being sponsored.

APPROVAL OF CANMET MANAGEMENT

Once it has been decided to hold an international conference, it is absolutely necessary to get CANMET management approval. The authorization request should mention estimated man-months and the use of telephone, telex and typing facilities for the conference work. Experience indicates that 3 man-months is a reasonable time effort. Every attempt should be made to hold committee meetings during lunch hours (with committee absorbing the cost) or dinner meetings (with the committee, once again, absorbing the cost). As far as possible, minimize the use of office working hours for conference work, and remember that organizational meetings are not a license for long-luncheons with liquid refreshments.

FORMATION OF AN ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

Having obtained management approval, the next step is to form an organizational committee. The chairman of the organizing committee should be a person of international scientific standing. He should have a proven track record of getting things done. It is essential that the chairman be a CANMET staff member. The chairman should have full veto power over the affairs of the organizing committee but he should run the committee in a democratic manner. The chairman should then appoint (preferably a CANMET member), a secretary-treasurer of the committee. Next to the chairman, this is the most important position, and the scientist/engineer appointed should be a hard-working reliable individual who is genuinely interested in this kind of assignment. Preferably, the chairman of the organizing committee should handle the assignment of technical program himself because it avoids disputes and helps speed up the selection of technical papers. The other members of the committee should come from industry and other government departments. The

membership of the organizing committee should be limited to no more than 7 people. Beyond this number, the committee becomes unwieldly and less productive

INVOLVEMENT OF INDUSTRY

Industry must be fully involved in participation in the conference. Sometimes it may be difficult to get sufficient technical papers from researchers in industry but every effort should be made to contact industrial groups and, if necessary, extra time and effort should be devoted towards this aspect. Generally it pays off in the end. A good technical program will draw considerable industrial support.

CO-SPONSORSHIP BY OTHER INSTITUTIONS

Sometimes it may be politically convenient to have other institutions such as CIMM, co-sponsor an international conference being organized by CANMET. Such co-sponsorship should not involve any financial commitment on the part of the organization which is being asked to co-sponsor. The intent here is to get access to the mailing lists of that organization and the use of its journals for free promotion. Experience indicates that organizations would welcome such an arrangement.

FINANCIAL ASPECTS

One cannot sponsor an international conference without adequate seed money. For a number of reasons, no funds should be solicited from CANMET; instead the industry should be asked to contribute basic seed money. Minimum amount needed to get started is about $3000.00 which can be collected easily, depending on the national/international standing of the members of the organizing committee

and their industrial contacts. Having secured the funds, a separate account with the chairman and the secretary treasurer of the committee having joint signing authority, should be opened at a local bank. Do not involve CANMET's financial group in this because it can only create bureaucratic delays.

LEAD TIME REQUIRED

To hold a successful conference, the necessary lead time is about 18 months to 2 years, though sometimes one year can be sufficient. A lead time of about 2 years allows sufficient time for call of papers, their receipt and review, and the publication of proceedings.

PUBLICITY AND PROMOTIONAL ASPECTS

One can never over publicize. Publicity and promotions in good taste, whether they are for a toothpaste or an international conference, never hurt. A mailing of about 4000 information circulars normally results in an attendance of about 200 participants. As large mailings are expensive and time consuming, it is essential that a master mailing list be prepared to avoid duplication and this list should be updated every year. Do not just mail circulars to everybody; be selective. Also, ensure that all technical journals related to the conference theme are provided with the publicity material. Trade journals are always happy to publish conference notices. Sometime it may even pay off to put a paid advertisement in an appropriate journal. Remember that if a paid advertisement results in two or three more participants it would have paid for itself.

SELECTION OF A LOCALE AND A HOTEL

It is preferable to hold international gatherings in Ottawa unless there is a definite reason to hold them elsewhere, e.g. in Calgary when organizing a conference dealing with pipelines or other energy related subjects. The selection of Ottawa makes it easier to handle last minute details. CANMET has been able to sponsor conferences of unqualified success at such places as St. Andrew's, N.B. and Montebello, Quebec; however it does involve transport and logistics problems, and therefore such locales are not recommended for those who are trying to organize their first international conference. If more than one international conference is planned on a single theme, then perhaps it is advisable to hold the first one in Ottawa and subsequent meetings in other countries where sufficient interest is evident. Having decided upon the city, the next step is to select a top quality hotel. Hotels catering to family business are not recommended. A first class hotel with trained convention personnel will make it easier to conduct a successful conference. The hotels will not normally charge for conference rooms and initially that should be clearly established with the hotel management. It is a sound policy to get everything agreed upon in writing from the hotel; even the best hotels are known to have gone back on their promises. Some hotels may increase slightly the price of their rooms to cover the cost for the conference rooms and that is acceptable. Make sure to visit hotel facilities and if possible arrange your organizing committee meetings at the hotel selected for the meeting. A good hotel should be able to absorb the cost of a luncheon of the organizing committee.

DURATION OF AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The ideal duration of an international conference seems to be three days. This allows foreign delegates to arrive and/or leave on a weekend. The suitable starting time is Tuesday afternoon with closing scheduled for Friday noon. The commencement on Tuesday afternoon allows delegates from the eastern seaboard of North America to arrive Ottawa/Montreal the same day, thus saving one night's hotel stay. The closing of the conference at noon or 1:00 p.m. on Friday allows the delegates to reach home the same day. This, again, saves an extra night's stay at a hotel.

NUMBER OF TECHNICAL SESSIONS

Assuming a three-day conference, the number of 2-hour technical sessions should be limited to about 10 (2 in each of the first and last one-half days and 3 in each of the two full days) with each author given about 20 minutes for his presentation and 10 minutes for discussion. This allows the presentation of about 40 papers. If less than 20 papers are offered for a conference, serious consideration should be given to postponing or cancelling the event. Remember that time is an expensive commodity and people should not be encouraged to travel long distance and spend a considerable amount of money for a conference of dubious value.

REGISTRATION FEES

For a two-and-a-half to three-day conference a registration fee of 250 dollars, appears to be a reasonable amount. Experience indicates that beyond 300 dollars it may be considered too expensive and below 200 dollars it may not generate sufficient funds to cover all expenses.

CUT-OFF DATES FOR REGISTRATION

Always announce a cut-off date for registration. Beyond this date, the registration fee should be increased by 50 dollars. The cut-off date aids proper planning, and the penalty allows one to collect additional funds to defray unexpected expenses. A suggested cut-off date is about four weeks before the start of a conference.

CANCELLATION FEES

Processing of registration is time consuming and costs money. Thus it is quite reasonable to levy cancellation charges. A cancellation fee of 75 dollars does not upset companies and individuals. Those who have been charged a cancellation fee should be sent a complimentary copy of the Proceedings of the conference. It creates goodwill and costs little.

WHAT SHOULD REGISTRATION FEE COVER?

A registration fee of about 250 dollars should cover the cost of proceedings, a reception (without any food) and complimentary coffee each day. Dinners are becoming very expensive items and it is preferable not to hold a dinner reception than to hold one and provide poor quality food. If registration number exceeds expectation, a complimentary luncheon may be provided as a last minute arrangement. It is easier and preferable to provide extras than to delete something which has already been announced in a program. The former wins appreciation and the latter creates ill feeling.

WHO PAYS REGISTRATION FEE?

As a matter of principle, all participants including authors and session chairmen should pay registration fees. This should be made quite clear in the beginning. The only complimentary registrants should be the members of the organizing committee, CANMET participants, and speakers receiving a subsidy.

HOW MANY PEOPLE CAN YOU EXPECT TO ATTEND?

The number of delegates attending an international conference will depend on the timeliness of the subject under discussion and the economic situation in the country. In general, for every paper presented you should expect 3 to 5 paying delegates. Thus at an international conference presenting a slate of about 40 speakers, one can expect anywhere from 120 to 200 participants to cover conference costs.

SUBSIDY TO SPEAKERS

There are always situations when some speakers, particularly academic personnel from the U.S.A. (comparatively, Canadian professors are well paid and have the benefit of NSERC funds for almost unlimited conference or committee work) and overseas may need financial assistance. The organizing committee should allow several thousand dollars for this purpose. As a matter of policy, the committee should never cover full expenses of any speaker; instead a speaker should be promised a subsidy of fixed amount, say $200 to $800. It is not essential to promise the same amount to those requesting financial assistance. Each case should be decided on its own merits as to the amount of subsidy to be provided. Individuals concerned should be told to look after their own hotel and travel expenses. Never allow any speaker to sign his/her hotel expenses to the committee's account. Invariably, some will abuse

this privilege. Those individuals who have been promised subsidy should be given their cheque at the first available opportunity. It leaves a bad taste when one has to ask for a promised subsidy.

TECHNICAL QUALITY OF PAPERS

The sole criterion for acceptance of a paper should be its technical quality. The language and format take a secondary place. If the review panels find the paper technically satisfactory, every effort should be made to assist the author with language and format. Rejection of manuscripts on the basis of poor language or format is not desirable or advisable. It will only discourage participation at the conference. If need be, hire editors to clean up the language and format. It wins goodwill and gratitude and increases participation.

PUBLICATION OF PROCEEDINGS

The proceedings should be available for distribution during the conference because invariably the delegates like to take the printed material with them, and it facilitates discussion at a conference. In order to publish the proceedings quickly and economically it is advisable to ask the authors to print their reviewed and revised paper on a rapid-print paper which is supplied to the authors by the organizing committee. The camera-ready manuscripts are then assembled, numbered and shipped to a printer. A soft cover publication should be printed under contract with an outside printer. TIC/CANMET can advise and assist in the selection of a printer. It is not advisable to involve TID in the actual production of proceedings because of the red-tape involved. At current prices, an 800-page volume would cost approximately thirty dollars per copy for a run of about 300 copies.

SLIDE-REVIEW COMMITTEE

In order to run the sessions smoothly and in a professional manner, and to make sure that the paying delegates get their money's worth, it is essential that slides presented should be of first-class quality and should be readable even from the end of a large conference hall. To ensure this, a slide-review committee consisting of two to three people should be formed and this committee should review all slides before presentation. Those not meeting the requirements stipulated in the instructions to authors should be rejected and retained until after the presentation. The authors should, of course, be warned of this procedure well in advance. Experience indicates that given sufficient prior warning most authors would co-operate. Occasionally an author would not. Under such circumstances the offending author should be taken off the program. Furthermore, no other audio-visual equipment such as overhead projectors should be allowed. These unnecessarily complicate the presentation because the majority of speakers do not know how to operate this equipment properly, and projection is usually poor.

SLIDE PRESENTATION

In order to make sure that slides are projected correctly, have trained personnel operate the slide projector and have sufficient carousels available for speakers. Make sure to have back-up projectors and spare bulbs. More often than not, a good presentation has been spoiled by poor equipment and untrained personnel. Always try to provide the largest possible screen and make sure there is a neck microphone.

SPEAKER'S BREAKFAST

All speakers and session chairmen should be invited for a speaker's breakfast on the day of their presentation and session. This is an excellent opportunity to sort out last minute details. The personnel operating the projectors should be present at this meeting equipped with a projector and a screen, and all slides should be placed in carousels by the speakers and checked for correct order.

IDENTIFICATION OF SPEAKERS AND OTHER PERSONNEL

All participants, speakers, session chairmen, and other committee members should be identified by appropriate ribbons and badges. This helps quick identification of individuals concerned and adds colour to the occasion. The name of an individual should be printed as large as possible to make it easier to read from a distance.

SELECTION OF SESSION CHAIRMEN

Session chairmen should be selected on the basis of their abilities to properly conduct a technical session, and not necessarily because of their seniority in a company or in a government department. They must be instructed to start and finish a session on time. Never delay a session because of insufficient number of participants; this only delays the whole process. Also, session chairmen should be asked to encourage discussion. If necessary, plant questions to get the discussion going. Chairing a session is an important function and make sure you select the right person.

SESSION MANAGER

One person should be designated as a session manager. This individual should be responsible for assuring that audio-visual equipment, microphones, and heating/air-conditioning function properly. He should have immediate access to the hotel maintenance personnel so that any breakdown of air-conditioning/heating or audio-visual equipment can be immediately repaired. This will leave a session chairman to concentrate on introducing speakers, maintaining the session schedules and handling discussion. Senior technologists at CANMET are ideally suited for this function.

ACCOMPANYING PERSONS PROGRAM

Experience indicates that what counts is a good technical program and one does not need accompanying persons (such as spouses) programs or other similar social activities to attract participation. These kinds of programs may be necessary for regular conventions of CIMM or other such organizations, but they are not essential for in-depth two or three-day technical conferences. If a large number of accompanying persons do show up, it is quite simple to make last minute arrangements for a bus tour of a city at cost. However every effort should be made to make accompanying persons feel at home at a conference. They should all be invited to receptions without additional registration fees and provided with suitable identification badges.

COMMITTEE HOSPITALITY SUITE

A hotel will provide, normally at no cost, a small suite for the use of an organizing committee if enough bedrooms are taken. This suite should serve as a centre for entertaining speakers, session chairmen and other overseas delegates. The committee should set aside sufficient funds for this purpose. A sum of about $1000 can be quite adequate.

INTRODUCTION OF SPEAKERS

Session chairmen should be advised to introduce speakers by name and affiliation. Long introductions cut into the presentation time and can be uneven, thus offending some speakers.

OPENING AND CLOSING CEREMONIES

The opening and closing ceremonies should be kept to an absolute minimum. Do not try to invite very senior management personnel to open the conference because, more often than not, departmental obligations may preclude their attendance at the last moment. Approximately 15 minutes for opening ceremonies and 5 minutes for closing function seems more than adequate. Delegates come to a conference to get technical information and not to hear motherhood statements from bureaucrats or company presidents.

CONCURRENT SESSIONS

As far as possible, always try to avoid concurrent sessions. This tends to divide participants and makes delegates unhappy. Furthermore, concurrent sessions can increase considerably the cost of simultaneous translation which is now a "must" for any CANMET sponsored conference. The services for simultaneous translations (English/French) are expensive and can cost about 10,000 dollars for a three-day conference.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Those days are gone when grey-haired professors gave learned lectures at meetings and conferences, and where the faithful duly turned up and sat through two or three days of solemn deliberations. In today's market-oriented society, an international conference is just like another commodity which has to

be correctly packaged, advertised and marketed. The speakers at a conference are like actors, with the delegates as the audience. The actors, (in this case, the authors) must give a reasonable performance so that the audience (in this case, the delegates) can go home with a feeling that time and money were well spent. It is almost disgraceful to attend a conference where a speaker comes from 3000 miles away and presents slides, consisting of tables from books, which cannot be read even 3 metres from a screen.

An international conference is a big investment in both time and money. For example, consider a three-day conference with 200 delegates paying 300 dollars for registration fee, spending about 400 dollars in hotel expenses, an average salary of 400 dollars in travel and spending 5 days of professional time at an average salary of 400 dollars per day. This all adds up to 620,000 dollars. This is big money and therefore under these circumstances one cannot take lightly the organization of an international conference.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

An international conference is an excellent vehicle for an economical transfer of CANMET technology to industry and for introducing new technology into Canada. However, in view of the investment in time and money, it should be treated as a serious undertaking. If it is properly planned, organized and executed, it can be a very rewarding scientific experience.

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